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The eTwinning Experience: Beyond the Classroom

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to give a presentation of the programme eTwinning, the use of CLIL methodology in eTwinning projects, give a glimpse of a successful project carried out by secondary students and present the future ahead regarding Higher Education. eTwinning offers the suitable environment to use the English language in a “real” context; it can be integrated in any subject due to its cross-curricular nature. In short, it prepares the student for the real world: international research, to get to know other cultures, to communicate and to learn content. I will start by giving a general view of what eTwinning is about. The second part will deal with eTwinning and CLIL. How CLIL methodology fits perfectly in the carrying out of eTwinning projects. In the third part, and drawn from personal experience, a project will be shown: “Addressing the Energy Crunch; Every Little Action Helps” as a good example of how to integrate content-learning in a collaborative project between different schools in Europe. The last part will deal with the future of eTwinning and Higher Education, within the new programme just approved by the European Parliament: Erasmus+ (2014-20).

1. Introduction

“The eTwinning Experience: Beyond the Classroom”. This is the title of my presentation. “Experience” because eTwinning is a different way to teach and learn, but also because what I am going to talk about is based on my own experience of working with eTwinning for 7 years. “Beyond the Classroom” is because eTwinning goes beyond the classroom boundaries and it spreads throughout Europe.

2. What is eTwinning?

The name eTwinning is made up of two words: “e” for “electronic” and “twin” for “reciprocal relation”. Therefore, it is a programme of the European Commission that offers a platform for schools to communicate, collaborate and carry out projects together on the internet and with two or more schools in different countries in Europe.

The official launching of eTwinning took place in January 2005. It became part of Comenius, the sectorial programme for schools under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LPP) in 2007. In January 2014 it was incorporated as an important part in the new Erasmus+, the new EU programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport (2014-2020).

eTwinning was born with the need for the use of ICT tools to enhance cooperation between schools in Europe through the internet, to develop joint projects using the tools and internet spaces made available for that. These projects were to be based on three basic features: collaborative work, use of ICT and the fostering of a European identity. Currently, it is open to teachers and school staff members from nursery to upper-secondary schools.

eTwinning has grown, and now it has become the biggest community of teachers in Europe. Currently there are over 235,000 teachers registered, 322,000 projects running and 117,172 schools working in cooperation.

The scope of eTwinning is getting wider. It included 28 EU member states, plus former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Turkey. Moreover, eTwinning Plus includes six countries from the European neighbourhood – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Tunisia. eTwinning offers teachers four main types of services:

- a) Ideas, advice and a safe online platform (Twinspace) to set up and carry out projects with other European partners.
- b) Professional networking in a European context: tools for finding partners for projects, forums and communities of practice (teachers' rooms, etwinning groups...).

c) Education opportunities. These can be face-to-face such as PDW (Professional Development Workshops), which can be national, bilateral or multilateral, or online such as Learning Events, seminars and webinars.

d) Recognition through national and European quality labels and awards.

eTwinning does not offer any financing, but it offers support with the above-mentioned tools and services. It is, therefore, an easy and cost-effective way for schools to engage in international collaboration. It is also a safe environment: everyone registered in eTwinning is a teacher as it is checked by the NSS and what's more, there is no spam or publicity. It is a flexible and versatile tool. There are no official dates or deadlines for registering, the duration and the activities can be self-tailored by partners and the initial plan can be revised and/or altered.

Coordination and support are catered through three basic organisations:

a) The Central Support Service (CSS) in Brussels (Belgium) which coordinates the whole action.

b) The National Support Services (NSS), responsible for promoting eTwinning in their countries, helping teachers to set up projects and organizing training sessions, among others.

c) A network of over 1,000 eTwinning ambassadors coordinated by the National Agencies. Ambassadors are teachers or former teachers, experienced in eTwinning projects, who advocate membership of the community, helping, supporting and guiding new eTwinners.

Let's focus now on a publication by the European Commission and the Directorate-General for Education and Culture: "Study of the Impact of eTwinning on Participating Pupils, Teachers and Schools". The study gathered data and evidence over 21 months through 24 school case studies in 13 countries and a general survey in 25 languages of almost 6,000 registered eTwinning members, together with a literature review and data and document review. These were the conclusions:

a) Impact on teachers

Teachers felt that eTwinning had offered them the opportunity to network across Europe and a sense of being involved in an international teaching community. They also felt that they had acquired new or improved ICT skills, and also improved their foreign language skills.

b) Impact on students

Teachers noticed a change but also an improvement in their pupils' abilities, knowledge and attitude to learning. What's more, the communication between teachers and students had become much better and less formal, creating a suitable environment for teaching and learning. Teachers also observed that their pupils were enthusiastic about working in teams and collaborating with other pupils of the same age in other countries of Europe. Pupils were also keen on learning about other countries and cultures. All in all, taking part in eTwinning projects made pupils feel empowered and more independent.

c) Impact on schools

With eTwinning, schools got a more international outlook. Teachers in the same school become more involved, and one project led to another, integrating eTwinning in the

curriculum. In conclusion, we could say that eTwinning is a very successful means of motivating students in the use of the language for communicative purposes, the use of ICT and enhancing students' understanding and knowledge of different European countries and cultures.

3. etwinning & CLIL

It has been already stated that eTwinning is a very successful means of motivating students in the use of language for communication purposes. eTwinning perfectly combines language use and ICT skills and reinforces the idea that language skills cannot be learned and practised in isolation from other fields of competence. It is cross-curricular and it easily allows the implementation of CLIL methodology.

With eTwinning, students discover how to learn differently: learning is learner-centred as students can design activities in the project. Students also gather knowledge by doing, collaborating, sharing and learning from their peers. It is problem-based learning and it also allows gamification, let's say the use of games in learning.

Any subject can be taught through eTwinning. As we can see from Table 1, drawn from a survey carried out to primary and secondary teachers, the most popular subjects for eTwinning projects are art, drama, natural sciences and physical education, most possibly because they do not need a high command of foreign languages, as these subjects have their own universal language. In lower secondary age groups, biology, geography, history, physics and religion are also among the most popular. And finally, economics, philosophy/logic and politics are covered in eTwinning projects. Any subject can be taught through eTwinning due to eTwinning's cross-curricular nature.

Table 1. Subject coverage of respondents' current projects: percentage of total projects by age of pupils involved in project (projects can cover multiple subjects).

Subject area of projects	3 or younger	4 to 11	12 to 15	16 to 19	20 or older
Art	3%	54%	42%	21%	2%
Astronomy	2%	44%	40%	33%	6%
Biology	3%	40%	54%	28%	3%
Chemistry	4%	22%	52%	53%	6%
Citizenship	1%	39%	46%	30%	2%
Classical Languages (Latin and Greek)	0%	25%	53%	39%	0%
Cross-curricular	1%	43%	46%	28%	3%
Design & Technology	3%	39%	51%	30%	3%
Drama	3%	54%	43%	20%	1%
Economics	0%	8%	32%	73%	6%
Environmental education	3%	46%	45%	27%	3%
Ethics	3%	34%	48%	41%	3%
European Studies	1%	29%	52%	37%	2%
Foreign Languages	1%	34%	52%	30%	1%
Geography	1%	37%	55%	25%	2%
Geology	6%	33%	47%	42%	3%
Health Studies	4%	43%	45%	35%	3%
History	1%	30%	54%	32%	1%
History of culture	1%	34%	49%	36%	2%
Home economics	4%	37%	47%	29%	1%
Informatics/ICT	2%	39%	50%	28%	2%
Languages and Literature	2%	38%	45%	34%	1%
Law	3%	30%	36%	45%	3%
Mathematics / Geometry	3%	38%	48%	29%	1%
Media education	2%	41%	48%	33%	2%
Music	2%	54%	43%	20%	1%
Natural sciences	4%	53%	44%	23%	3%
Philosophy/ Logic	0%	21%	29%	71%	0%
Physical education	3%	54%	47%	21%	3%
Physics	5%	23%	63%	41%	3%
Politics	4%	13%	42%	77%	4%
Pre-school subjects	15%	92%	10%	4%	4%
Psychology	6%	47%	27%	47%	6%
Religion	4%	30%	54%	31%	2%
Social studies/ sociology	1%	29%	47%	42%	2%
Special Needs Education	6%	58%	52%	26%	6%

4. An eTwinning project

Let's see an example of a successful eTwinning project: "Addressing the Energy Crunch: Every Little Action Counts". This project was integrated in a Comenius Multilateral Partnership with 3 participating schools in Sweden, Lithuania and Spain. It focused on the topic of energy conservation and efficiency and around 200 students actively participated in it for 2 years (2010-12).

The project was awarded the National and European Quality Labels and it also received the Spanish 1st National Prize in 2013 in the category of 12-15 year-olds, and the Swedish 1st National Prize in the same year. It was also shortlisted for the eTwinning European Prizes in 2013 and labelled Star Project in the EST (European Shared Treasure), the European Commission Database.

The working language of the project is English and was actually used during the English language lessons, but with full participation of other teachers from other subjects such as Science, Technology and Art. One specific example of how the CLIL methodology is integrated is Activity 2.2. "Digging Deeper into Renewable Energies". All students first had to answer a questionnaire about the use of renewable energies in the three partner countries:

- 1) What do you think is the source of energy used in your country?
- 2) Which country (a) Lithuania, b) Spain c) Sweden has the largest production?:
 - Solar
 - Nuclear Energy
 - Hydropower
 - biomass energy
 - Wind energy
- 3) What country do you think uses as much energy per person?
- 4) What country do you think produces the largest amount of garbage per person?
- 5) Which country do you think that recycles the most?
- 6) What country do you think has more green cars?

The results were published in Twinspace and are then verified at the end of step 2.2.

Then students were put in transnational groups of 5-6 students from the three countries:

20 working groups on different topics: 1.Biofuels 2.Green electricity: windpower 3.Green electricity: solar power 4.Green electricity: Hydro power 5.Green electricity: biomass 6.Biomass for heating plants (Firewood, wood chips, straw, biowaste, biogas), biofuels (ethanol and biodiesel) 7.Solar thermal heating 8.The energy we use every day in our men (the energy we use in our homes daily) 9. Nuclear power 10. How do hospitals, schools, churches in our towns (Dalby Lund, Marijampole, Vic) use energy? 11. What can be recycled and used for new things? 12. How do we take care of the waste that might be toxic or pollute our environment? 13. The use of composts by individuals and society 14. What happens with household garbage? What kind of garbage does not have a household and how is it taken care of? 15. What sort of labels are there for merchandisers in the shops, i.e. for ecologically produced products, from the vicinity and so on? 16. The energy use of an ordinary teenager. What activities require energy and how much? 17.Water and its way from tap to tap 18.Energy use over time, in a historical perspective, then, now, later.19. What do we do with our garbage, in a historical perspective, then, now, later. 20. Public transportation in our towns.

Students used different wikis in the TwinSpace to edit information about their own country: with text, pictures and links to related websites or videos. After that, they prepared a graphic and oral presentation (web www.edu.glogster.com Webtool) on the subject about another country: - Swedish students about Lithuania, Lithuanian students about Catalonia / Spain, Catalan students about Sweden. This activity is a good sample of a collaborative activity, using CLIL methodology and ICT.

5. eTwinning & Higher Education

Erasmus+ is the new programme for Education, Youth, Culture and Sport of the European Commission for the period of 2014-2020. It supports 3 main types of key actions:

Key Action 1: mobility for individuals;

Key Action 2: cooperation for innovation and exchange of good practices;

Key Action 3: support for policy reform.

The aims are to boost skills and employability, to modernise education, training and youth work across Europe. The programme has decided to reinforce the role of eTwinning with the aims to promote collaborative learning, project-based pedagogy and European cooperation among schools, universities and other institutions. Moreover, it aims at supporting the use of digital technology in learning, teachers' professional development and peer-learning. As said before, eTwinning is an important part in the development plan for KA2, and intended to be used as the digital platform for collaboration for all kinds of partnerships: schools, universities, NGOs and other kinds of institutions.

Regarding eTwinning and Higher Education, it is foreseen that there will be a slow transition before it becomes fully operative, during 2014 and even 2015. This is due to the needs for technical, administrative and management provisions in the platform.

eTwinning is also foreseen to be included in initial teacher training. In some Spanish universities they are already running workshops on eTwinning in the programme for the Master's for Teachers of Secondary Education. In Primary Education, eTwinning is currently integrated in the curriculum.

The eTwinning Desktop is to be the meeting place for universities and schools to collaborate together, with a search engine for educational centres to offer training placements and job shadowing posts.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, I only want to say that for sure you are all going to hear about eTwinning in the coming months/years, and most probably it is going to be an essential part in the teaching-learning activities in most schools and universities. Needless to say, eTwinning offers teachers and pupils the opportunity to teach and learn content in a foreign language in collaboration with other teachers and pupils in other countries in Europe, a suitable environment where language comes alive, pupils become more confident and autonomous, and they acquire new ICT skills and learn about other cultures.

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